

PREFACE (2002)

The Hickory Bluff Public Works project represents a transformation in our thinking about the archaeology of Native America in the Eastern United States. Our perspective was altered as a consequence of the wider intellectual changes occurring in our profession and the personal experiences encountered during the Hickory Bluff project. The opportunity to further the State's research needs and fully describe our experiences was conducted in the context of a large excavation, with client support and encouragement. Hence, the following pages of this report aim to provide a detailed public and scientific account about the structure of archaeological sites and material culture, and to conduct exploratory research to expand our knowledge about Native American people and Delmarva societies. Considering Hickory Bluff in light of broadening theoretical developments inclusive of functional-processual archaeology and humanistic approaches, as well as the genuine integration of public and Native American views furthers our goal. Observers of regional archaeology will hopefully recognize that the Hickory Bluff research is conducted in a public Cultural Resource Management (CRM) context without much precedent, hence we feel that the relative merit or failure of our approach should be judged in this framework.

The wide site excavation strategy, the recovery of a large material assemblage, and the computerized links between the field maps and artifact data set provided many novel information sources. These exploratory tools allowed us to examine the meaning of patterning at a so-called "multi-component" site. To accurately interpret behavior from material arrangements and associations, increased analytical and experimental scrutiny was given to the cultural and natural processes responsible for the formation of deposits, spatial patterns, and feature morphology. In furthering our consideration of the natural and cultural site formations, we were struck by a comment made one day by Kevin Cunningham, remarking that the observed features appeared rather "chaotic" in structure--that is, not one of our types looked exactly alike. This simple but perceptive remark led us to ponder our typological framework and whether Chaos Theory--which sees order and pattern from random, erratic and unpredictable processes--could be useful in feature analysis or to archaeology in general. Chaos Theory, and the even wider-ranging Complexity Theory, provided us with some useful insights for reconsidering field observations, material culture, and behavior.

As a backdrop to the Hickory Bluff project, the discipline of archaeology has witnessed major upheavals in academic orientation in recent years, expanding from a narrowly focused ecological-evolutionary paradigm, to one which contemplates the interplay of economic, social, political, and religious institutions and the role of humans as actors. The exposure of our once-cloistered discipline through public outreach and the inclusion of voices from alternate perspectives have opened up new ground for examining the past. While some professionals treat these changes with skepticism in the absence of a clear paradigmatic goal, others consider that this period of uncertainty also may be construed as a healthy signal, accommodating room for a greater range of questions about archaeology, and perhaps providing for a more well-rounded interpretation of the past.

While the dominant ecological-evolutionary oriented archaeologies of the past four decades inserted much scientific and methodological rigor in the discipline, postprocessual perspectives introduced a realization that there were alternate ways to assign meaning to

archaeological phenomena, that specific histories do matter, and that our political and social influences shape our behavioral views. Perhaps the greatest contribution of postprocessualism is a humanist focus on the past, and the development of histories that are sensitive to both local communities and larger scientific interests.

Despite the long standing international and national debates in archaeology, specialists in Native American archaeology of the Mid-Atlantic generally have avoided the processual-post-processual debate and rarely have experimented with interpretive reorientations. Mid-Atlantic archaeology is dominated by ecological and economic studies in an evolutionary framework, a practice that emerged forcefully in the 1970s as part of the New Archaeology, and was vigorously taught at regional universities and applied commonly in CRM projects. As a consequence, many regional studies tend to center on changes in settlement-subsistence patterns and adaptive technologies. In highlighting these facts, we are not suggesting that this approach is without merit, the main point is that Mid-Atlantic archaeology begs for a broader, more holistic approach. Archaeologists and the public therefore would benefit by taking account of particular histories, individual and community influences, and the impact of social and religious practices and institutions.

A pivotal launch in our personal and collective journey began, in fact, as a result of DelDOT's public outreach program. After contact through telephone conversations, on one day in August of 1998, then Assistant Chief Charlie Clark IV and Kathy Clark of the Nanticoke Indian Association and Joe McElwee, a Lakota supporter and Nanticoke friend, visited Hickory Bluff at the height of excavations. The Delaware State Historic Preservation Officer, Dan Griffith, and the archaeologists supervising the excavations, joined these three individuals on-site. As the archaeologists led the tour around the site, all the detailed facts about the excavation, the field methods, the stratigraphy, and the meticulous science behind it all were carefully reviewed. All the typical field interpretations and findings concerning site ecology, Native American activity, tool making, and feature formation were reported. In sharp contrast, walking and peering around the excavated basins and gazing at the large oak, hickory and pine trees, and the still tidal river, the Native Americans talked about the special feel and sacred nature of the setting. In this meeting, and in subsequent exchanges, the then Assistant Chief spoke about the surfaces uncovered as the "ground his ancestors had walked on" and where "his ancestors carried out their daily lives". We were reminded that as excavators we had a "moral obligation to tell meaningful stories" about our predecessors since we were the ones who brought the "spirits back from long forgotten and dead things". In a discourse based on possible feature functions and the Nanticoke Skeleton Dance--a burial process that involves placement of a body in a pit, later exhumation, bone defleshing, and bundling--it was opined that some of our basin features potentially may have been cemetery-related. From this perspective, basin features and associated artifacts were seen as elements in sacred ceremonies and served as other functions not ever described before and could have served as a variety of social, ceremonial and economic needs.

Following our field meeting and in subsequent exchanges, we recognized that while the Nanticoke and the archaeologists had some divergent opinions about the archaeological record and its meaning, we all appreciated the past and we had many ideas in common that needed to be developed. While all agreed rapprochement was a good idea, the lack of mutually shared histories kept the sides separated. Symbolic of this disjuncture, when the on-site excavators were asked whether we had ever been to the annual Nanticoke Powwow, none could reply in the

affirmative. While the lack of interaction may be considered perplexing, it was probably not too unusual, as professionals have had a long history of working on prehistoric sites without communicating with descendant communities. As a follow-up to learn more about Native Americans and their interests, our team leaders attended the Nanticoke Powwow over a September weekend. We were happy to find that the Powwow was an impressive social gathering, consisting of many national, regional and local tribes and large crowds interested in celebrating Native American heritage.

In further developing a relationship with the Native American community, at the conclusion of the Hickory Bluff excavations in October 1998, just prior to imminent road and bridge construction, federal and state agencies replied positively to a Nanticoke request to conduct on-site ceremonies. Two ceremonies were subsequently held, a sweat lodge ceremony over one day, from daybreak to early evening the next day, and in the early morning, a public blessing ceremony. The archaeological team was invited to take part in the sweat lodge ceremony for purification and cleansing. Prior to engaging in the sweat lodge ceremony, we novices did not realize the potential impact that the event could have on shaping our views.

Prior to undertaking the two-day long sweat lodge ceremony, we approached the event as a potentially valuable learning experience, similar to any archaeological experiment. The ceremony began with construction of a domed shelter of tree saplings and the building of a large ceremonial fire to intensively heat rock. While we gained knowledge about how such a site was constructed, we soon realized that this was no normal scientific routine once prayers commenced, changing the situation from a light and fun atmosphere to one with a far more serious overtone. The four-hour long sweat lodge experience that followed was a physically and mentally demanding exercise for all project participants. The combined fasting, the preparation events, and the lodge experience--replete with pitch darkness, overwhelming heat and smoke, pitched singing and drumming, personal revelations and reflections, and the pulsating view of molten stone--integrated in a most overwhelming fashion. At the conclusion of the sweat and feasting after a 24 hour fast, and then a short night's rest, we returned for the public blessing ceremony. This was held in the early morning, attended by government officials, archeologists and several dozen people from the Nanticoke tribe and the Lenape tribe, who have worked at DelDOT sites for 17 years. At the close of the two days of ceremonies, we soon realized that we had just been participants in a set of powerful rituals, ones that could indeed shape and reinforce personal and community ideology. In thinking about how ceremonies such as these could leave traces behind in the ground--we were struck by what we observed at the sweat--the infrastructure of a typical site--complete with a shelter, a trampled area, basin pits of different sizes, and a variety of thermally altered stones. Our eyes now were opened to the way ceremonial behaviors and ideology could result in seemingly "mundane" patterns that approximated features we commonly excavated in archaeological context! On the other hand, the public blessing ceremony was virtually impossible to detect archaeologically.

In grappling with our collective personal experiences and the relation of Hickory Bluff in Delmarva Native American society, it became apparent that we had to begin re-formulating some basic questions about the past. A main issue concerned the mechanics of how we incorporated more holistic views to comprehensively interpret artifacts and sites. We reached out to our western colleagues who had been working with Native Americans for years: T. J. Ferguson, Nina Swidler, Julie Francis and other State DOTs. While no simple pathway emerged, as there were

few site-based precedents to rely on, we decided to take some exploratory steps towards achieving a more balanced perspective. To do so, we have considered aspects of various processual and postprocessual models and we have explored the ethnohistoric literature and Native American views. In this reoriented approach, we do not aim to denigrate or radically depart from earlier work as some are quick to do; rather, we attempt to test and discuss the best elements of various schools of thought in concert, build on what we know, and incorporate new ways of thinking. In this sense, we see enormous interpretive potential in this expanded approach; thus, we feel that our conclusions in this report represent a beginning for the re-examination of old and new data sources. In this regard, we believe that this volume is an example of a shift in approach that currently has few boundaries.

After having the opportunity to interact with the Delmarva Native American community for four years on the Hickory Bluff excavation, it is obvious that while some divergences of perspective and opinion remain, much common ground certainly is shared. In addition to the heightened sense of understanding that has emerged, mutual interests of both parties are clear, including the respect for Native American history and the need to protect our collective archaeological and environmental heritage. The 2001 Delaware Archaeology Month poster is meant to be emblematic of our progress in the integration of our views--weaving Native American and archaeological symbols together.

Hickory Bluff was, and will remain, a special place for so many. In recalling our first walk over the site prior to excavation, we remember how anxious we were, like any archaeologist, to set our trowels into the ground, find artifacts, and uncover features. As the site excavations progressed, transcending the winter, spring, and early summer, it became clear how fond we became of the site. Many of our team members appreciated what we had experienced and the beauty of the setting, leading individuals to spend quiet, contemplative moments alone and together in the woods. Our strong feelings undoubtedly were related to the daily thrill of uncovering many fascinating finds, the hard work and dedication invested by many, and our collective notion that we were doing something worthwhile for archaeology, Native American and Delaware heritage. In living and writing this story, it also became apparent that by investing this energy in contemplating the past, we could gain an even greater appreciation for, and connection with, Hickory Bluff's Native inhabitants. We wondered how powerful symbols, such as the recurrent construction of turtle nests on site, or the nearby St. Jones Adena site, may have figured into Native American belief systems. As interpreters of the past, it was obvious that in addition to our purely ecological-economic views, we could think more broadly about the cognitive, spiritual, and social aspects of the lives of peoples who came before us. The following pages attempt to balance our traditional scientific methods with expanded avenues of interpretation. As you wade through the thick description of this report, do not forget to take reflective moments to think about the heat, smoke, light, and smell of the fires, the sound of stone on stone tool making, and the clamor of conversations that came before these written words.

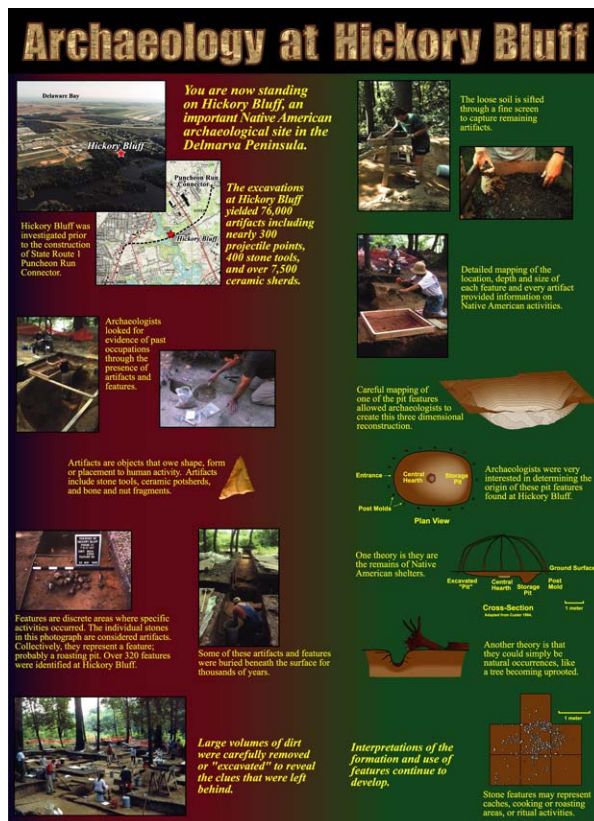
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In 2002, the draft Hickory Bluff technical report was submitted to the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) and the Delaware State Historic Preservation Office for review. At the request of DelDOT, Dr. Robert Wall of Towson University in Maryland was invited to serve as the ‘outside’ reviewer for the draft report and agreed to tackle this enormous challenge. The review process for the Hickory Bluff report has spanned three years. The literature cited and interpretations represent the current data as of 2002.

Parsons would like to express a sincere thank you to all those who ‘read the whole thing’ (especially Dr. Wall) and to all those who provided constructive comments and review on selected sections of the draft.

With the release of this document, another chapter of the Hickory Bluff story is complete but the story lives on. In 2003, a bike path and walking trail were developed near the former location of Hickory Bluff. Informational posters were prepared and two kiosks were constructed.



Kiosk Panels

With the publication of this volume and appendices, it is hoped that Hickory Bluff will continue to provide insights into the past far into the future.

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